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Issue Brief

Understanding China's Growing Military Outreach in Central Asia

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S*ummary*

China has increased its military presence in the Central Asian region in recent years through military exercises and training military professionals, upping its arms assistance and building military infrastructure. The Chinese military footprint is expanding in the so-called weaker Central Asian nations. However, those with a relatively stronger economy and security structures are resisting Chinese overtures in their manner. China's growing military footprints in Central Asia impacts not only the region, but also its neighbours especially Russia and India.

Central Asia has been traditionally considered an area of Russian security influence. Over time and more so after the US began to cede space in the region with folding of its bases in Uzbekistan in 2005, and Kyrgyzstan in 2014, China's security interests in Central Asia have grown. Arguably, China has filled up the vacuum at the expense of Russia, which would have been the logical choice. Incidentally, on 1 August 2017, China inaugurated a military base in Djibouti. This was a sharp departure from China's policy that it does not station troops or set up military bases in foreign countries. Likewise, in 2017 several reports emerged of Chinese military personnel in Tajikistan. Now, we hear reports of Chinese military presence in Equatorial Guinea forcing many to call it, China's Military Engagement along the Silk Route. If we transpose the Chinese design in Central Asia, what will be the long-term consequences of Chinese military footprints in Central Asia? Can China's presence to secure its vast Belt and Road Initiative network in Central Asia affect the security balance in the region? Further, can Beijing's military competitiveness in Central Asia lead to a Russia–China divergence? And, what are the imperatives for India?

Terror Threats and Nature of China's Military Involvement

China's security outreach in Central Asia is linked to its perceived (some say, exaggerated) threats. The main reason appears to be China's expanding national interests and the need for a commensurate security to protect her interests. As China's national interests expand due to geo-politics and geo-economics, the supporting military structure too will expand. The policy shift from purely 'economics' to 'economics and security' became apparent in 2015, when Xi Jinping asserted the importance of military diplomacy as a foreign policy instrument.¹ China's perceived threats in Central Asia are: (i) attack on its BRI infrastructure and citizens involved; and (ii) spillover of radical Islamic terror in Xinjiang and narcotics smuggling. Though China has been looking at the security of its BRI infrastructure in a comprehensive manner along with the host governments, the 2016 terror attack on Chinese embassy in Bishkek was possibly the tipping point. Though Chinese investments in Central Asian countries were initially welcomed, the host countries have begun to show anger and discontent as Chinese promises of local employment and revenue generation have not happened at the scale envisioned. It has landed economic costs on countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which are important for connecting Beijing's transportation and infrastructure projects linked to the BRI.²

¹ [**"How is China Bolstering its Military Diplomatic Relations?"**](#), *ChinaPower*.

² [**"China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia"**](#), *Voices on Central Asia*, 19 January 2018.

Also, Beijing fears a possible 'fan-out' of the radical ideology to Xinjiang through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as the Taliban may not be able to rein in renegade groups such as ISIL and ETIM for a long time. Elsewhere in Central Asia, according to Human Rights Watch, in 2019, Kazakhstan detained 500 alleged members of IS, and sentenced 14 citizens for participating in conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley, many terrorists found their 'jihadi' calling in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Turkmenistan, Chinese BRI investments in the China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway and the Turkmenbashi International Seaport are vulnerable to terror outfits. To address these threat concerns, Beijing is increasing arms exports, military exercises, imparting military education, constructing military bases and using Private Security Companies (PSCs).

China's Arms Exports in Central Asia

In Central Asia, China has provided 18 per cent of the region's arms in the last five years,³ whereas it was 1.5 per cent for the period 2010–2014.⁴ China has overtaken Russia in arms exports to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the last five years. All Central Asian countries have received technologically advanced weapons from China including armed drones, communication equipment and UAVs⁵ in the last five years. Kazakhstan received Wing Loong-1 drones⁶ (copy of the US Predators) and the Russian modelled Y-8 transport aircraft⁷ (copy of An-12). Tajikistan received Hongqi-9 (copy of S-300) missile systems in 2019. Uzbekistan was the first country to receive Wing Loong-I drones from China in 2014. The most recent Chinese platform acquired by Uzbekistan is the QW-18, shoulder-fired AD missile system in 2019.⁸ China has overtaken Russia to become Turkmenistan's second-largest arms supplier after Turkey.⁹

³ Maryann Xue, ["China's Arms Trade: Which Countries Does It Buy From and Sell To?"](#), *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 2021.

⁴ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, ["In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia"](#), Kennan Cable No. 52, Wilson Centre, May 2020.

⁵ Jeanne L. Wilson, ["Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship"](#), *Acta Via Serica*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2021, pp. 55–90.

⁶ ["Chinese Wing Loong UAVs – Proliferating Across the World"](#), Air Power Asia.

⁷ ["China Delivers Y-8 Military Transport Aircraft to Kazakhstan"](#), *DefenceWorld.Net*, 26 September 2018.

⁸ Sergey Sukhankin, ["The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Three: China's \(Para\)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan"](#), *China Brief*, Vol. 20, No. 18.

⁹ Joshua Kucera, ["Report: Turkmenistan is Turkey's Biggest Weapons Buyer"](#), *Eurasianet*, 20 February 2017.

Military Exercises

Since 2002, when the first Sino-Kyrgyz anti-terror exercise was conducted, China has upped the scale of exercises in bilateral and multilateral formats, as well as under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Russia and China held 10 bilateral exercises in Central Asia from 2014 to 2019. From 2014 onwards, China has been showcasing its technology and magnitude in exercises in Central Asia. An exercise in 2016 with Tajikistan involved 10,000 personnel in the Gorno-Badakshan region.¹⁰ The same year, China founded the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), a multilateral organisation comprising China, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan that focuses on security issues in the region.¹¹ China's motivation to establish this 'Quad' appeared to be borne out of its inability to steer the SCO and its Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) to pursue its agenda.¹² In 2019, a three-day military exercise in the Gorno-Badakshan region led to several military observers commenting that Dushanbe is increasingly outsourcing its security needs to Beijing.¹³ From 2019 onwards, China has held bilateral counter terrorism exercises called 'Cooperation-2019' involving Chinese PAP (People's Armed Police) with Kyrgyzstan National Guards and Uzbekistan Police Forces¹⁴ respectively.

Professional Military Education

The Central Asian countries continue to maintain legacy military training in Russian academies but here also, China's efforts are increasing. In early 2000s, China had trained about 15 Kazakh officers¹⁵ in its academies. The numbers increased to 65, in 2010. In the last five years, about 30 Kyrgyz officers have been trained by China.¹⁶ In 2014, China established the National Institute for Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai,

¹⁰ Sergey Sukhankin, ["The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two: China's \(Para\)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan"](#), *China Brief*, Vol. 20, No. 14.

¹¹ Joshua Kucera, ["Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan Deepen 'Anti-Terror' Ties"](#), *Eurasianet*, 4 August 2016.

¹² Jeanne L. Wilson, No. 5.

¹³ ["Tajikistan, China to Hold Another Joint Military Drill in Pamirs"](#), *Eurasianet*, 9 July 2019.

¹⁴ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, No. 4.

¹⁵ Sébastien Peyrouse, ["The Central Asian Armies Facing the Challenge of Formation"](#), *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, Issue 11, 2010.

¹⁶ Temur Umarov, ["China Looms Large in Central Asia"](#), Carnegie Moscow Centre, 30 March 2020.

which has trained 300 officers from SCO countries in less than four years.¹⁷ In 2016, China helped Kazakhstan in establishing a Chinese Department in Kazakhstan University of Defence.¹⁸ Uzbekistan Internal Security Academy and China's People's Security University are official partners since May 2017.¹⁹ China hosted 213 officers from Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry in courses on counter-terrorism and drug trafficking in its training institutes.²⁰ In 2019, a delegation from the Uzbek Defense Ministry visited China to study Chinese military media.²¹ As Beijing plans to increase the enrollment of foreign students, universities have begun to actively recruit Central Asian military officers for Chinese programmes.²² Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan now have their senior military officials educated in Chinese universities. The PLA National Defense University (NDU) and the Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan are cooperating on educational exchanges.²³ Students and staff of the Military-Technical Institute of the National Guard of Uzbekistan take Chinese-language classes to build proficiency, in case they have an opportunity to study in China.²⁴ In recent times, the PLA NDU has offered higher stipends and greater exposure to Chinese technological and scientific innovations to Central Asian students than to Russian schools.²⁵

Involvement of People's Armed Police

A trend seen in recent years has been the involvement of China's People's Armed Police (PAP) in training with the local police of the Central Asian country.²⁶ China has focused on developing ties with Central Asia's security services and police forces compared to Russia which has focused mainly on military ties. About 66 per cent of Russian exercises in Central Asia have involved the Russian Army and Air Force compared to China, where 59 per cent of Chinese exercises have involved their armed police. In 2019, China started the 'Cooperation-2019' series of exercises which allows China to interoperate its PAP with PMF (Para Military Forces) and Police of Central

¹⁷ Matthew Southerland, Will Green and Sierra Janik, ["The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection"](#), U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Issue Brief, 12 November 2020.

¹⁸ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, No. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sergey Sukhankin, No. 8.

²² Erica Marat, ["China's Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia"](#), *Ponars Eurasia*, 19 April 2021.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bonnie Girard, ["How China Uses the People's Armed Police as Agents of Diplomacy"](#), *The Diplomat*, 20 November 2020.

Asian countries. The Chinese PAP has been training local police officers of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in counter-terrorism operations and transnational terror in the Cooperation 2019 series of drills.

Military Bases

Chinese military presence is most noticeable in Tajikistan where China's concerns appear to be on security and counter-terrorism.²⁷ In October 2016, China and Tajikistan reached an agreement on constructing 11 border outposts and a training centre for border guards.²⁸ A Chinese outpost came up in the Murghab district of Gorno-Badakshan after this agreement. As per the satellite pictures, the outpost houses a helipad, billets for 1,000 personnel and ramps for tanks. Lately, Tajikistan has concluded an agreement with China for the construction of another base in Gorno-Badakshan close to the Wakhan corridor for Tajikistan's Special Forces.²⁹ In 2021, China opened up an airport near Tajikistan's border. It is the first of the 30 airports it is planning to construct as part of its tourism infrastructure upgrade in Xinjiang and Tibet.³⁰ The US Department of Defense in its 2020 report has included Tajikistan in the list of locations for future Chinese military activities.³¹

Role of Private Security Companies

Beijing has repeatedly spoken about providing traditional and non-traditional forms of security to Chinese industrial sites and transportation networks, especially for the BRI projects. Non-traditional security refers to the use of PSCs.³² China's paramilitary state organisations such as Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps are remodelling their scope of work to include security services for BRI. The state-owned China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) already has an agreement with the Kyrgyzstan government for public surveillance to protect its interests in case of anti-China demonstrations.³³ The China Railway Group involved in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Rail project relies for security

²⁷ Ananth Krishnan, ["Eye on Afghanistan, China to Build Military Base in Tajikistan"](#), *The Hindu*, 28 October 2021.

²⁸ Catherine Putz, ["China in Central Asia: Building Border Posts in Tajikistan"](#), *The Diplomat*, 26 September 2016.

²⁹ Ananth Krishnan, No. 27.

³⁰ ["China is Building 30 Airports in Xinjiang, Tibet near Indian Border, PoK, Movement of Troops will be Faster"](#), *Hindustan News Hub*, 9 September 2021.

³¹ ["Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020"](#), Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, United States of America.

³² ["Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads"](#), NBR Special Report No. 80, The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2019.

³³ Ibid.

services on Zhongjun Junhong Security Company.³⁴ Not only Moscow but even Western countries are concerned, as even a small presence of PSCs could play a role in shaping the domestic and foreign policies of countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Consequences of Chinese Military Footprints in Central Asia

If we recall Xi Jinping's speech of 2015, he spoke about military diplomacy as a critical element of China's foreign policy.³⁵ In Central Asia, China will protect itself from threats to its national interests but in the short term, will avoid getting directly involved. It will involve the local governments, possibly influence them in countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. By supplying sophisticated technologies, China is establishing a strategic foothold in areas where Russia is lagging technologically. In exercises and training, China has been balancing its multilateral exercises with bilateral exercises. Multilateral exercises allow China to project its inventory for future sales and inter-operability capabilities, whereas bilateral exercises allow it to project itself as a contender and responder like Russia. Sponsoring military courses for Central Asia pay back to China through an alumni roster with a similar understanding of security issues, not to mention camaraderie and old friendships. Central Asia now has middle and senior-level officials who have been educated in Chinese universities. In the coming years, Chinese military education will have a significant impact on the composition of military leadership in Central Asia.³⁶ Staying away from PLA and locating PAP in Tajikistan appears to be a thought-out Chinese strategy to keep itself within Russia's red lines of not involving the army. However, it will not take much time for China to turn over or reinforce these posts with PLA, should such a need arise. The presence of Chinese troops near Wakhan which is about 200 km from Gilgit Baltistan has ramifications for India. Any Chinese EW (Electronic Warfare) monitoring facility located here can be used to track Russia's military activities in the region and even India's. Chinese proposed airports close to Tajikistan's borders could be a part of the larger Chinese strategic design. PSCs can assume roles as consultants, advisors and security providers but their main role could be surveillance of the local governments and influencing governance and policies. Kazakhstan prohibits Chinese PSCs,³⁷ but Kyrgyzstan is open to its operations. China might pressure the weaker countries to legally allow PSCs in their sovereign territories.

³⁴ Yau Tsz Yan, "[Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia](#)", *The Diplomat*, 3 July 2019.

³⁵ No. 1.

³⁶ Erica Marat, No. 22.

³⁷ Jeanne L. Wilson, No. 5.

Can It Lead to a Russia–China Dissonance?

There are commonalities of interest between the two countries on Afghanistan, the US role in the region and support to incumbent regimes in Central Asia. Both are members of SCO and regularly participate in joint and bilateral military exercises. Russia has provided China with sophisticated military hardware in the last decade, while China has emerged as one of the most prominent buyers of Russian oil. In 2019 at a BRI forum, President Putin in his speech mentioned that China's BRI meshes perfectly with the gears of Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union³⁸. So, in the short term, China may continue to defer to Russia on the security front in the region.

Russia's arms share of Central Asian arms imports has remained constant at around 60 per cent in the last 10 years.³⁹ On the other hand, China has been slicing from the share of Turkey, Ukraine, Spain, France and others in Central Asia. Thus, China may not be eating into Russia's share of the arms market now, but may start doing so as China's domestic arms industry develops and seeks export markets. This can cause friction and their relationship can see testing times ahead. China's role in construction activities for the Tajik military may be acceptable to Russia, but to be sure that China will not use the infrastructure for military requirements in the future is a question mark. This is so because China has concerns about radicalism in the Pamir's. There are tensions between Tajikistan and the Taliban. China has outstanding claims on Tajikistan's territory. In 2011, Tajikistan had handed over 1,000 sq km of territory to China in the Pamir region in lieu of a loan. If in the long run, China attempts to slice a portion of the strategically important Wakhan corridor as a justification to stem vulnerabilities from Afghanistan, it can cause serious consternation with Russia.

The popular narrative in Central Asia was that Russia is the dominant security partner while China takes the lead in economic affairs—'Russia Protects–China Invests'. If we were to dilate this, does it mean, China will let this narrative remain forever? Will it continue to play second fiddle to Russia in the security domain, even when its economic interests grow? Will China want its soft power to be protected by Russia?

Imperatives for India

China views expansion into Central Asia through the lens of sourcing resources and markets for Chinese goods and projecting power. India too considers the region essential to nurture and expand its strategic potential. There is natural

³⁸ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, No. 4.

³⁹ Ibid.

competitiveness and thus, China will exercise whatever capabilities it has to prevent India's elevation as a Central Asian power. India's unresolved border with China, construction of a highway through Indian territory in Aksai Chin, and enabling Pakistan to construct the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir has affected India's outreach to the region. The recent LAC (Line of Actual Control) violations and the construction of a string of villages by China in Tibet have caused a trust deficit. Any Chinese military presence in Central Asia would widen the cracks. Another cause for concern is the China's encirclement strategy and attempts to limit India's role in the region through the Pakistan proxy. Pakistan seeks connectivity by road to Uzbekistan via Kabul and to Kazakhstan via Kashgar in China. It realises India's dilemma in reaching out to Central Asia. PM Imran Khan during his address at the Islamabad Security Dialogue on 17 March 2021, raised the Kashmir issue as a 'quid pro quo' to offering India a direct route to Central Asia. India will therefore want to counter the influence of Pakistan in Central Asia. However, China's close ties with Pakistan and its resurgent role in Central Asia can affect India's ability to influence favourable outcomes vis-à-vis China and Pakistan in Central Asia.

India has a small presence in Tajikistan with a military training team and an India–Tajik friendship hospital at Bokhtar (Kurgun Teppa).⁴⁰ It spent about US\$ 70 million from 2002 to 2010 to renovate the disused Ayni airbase in Tajikistan.⁴¹ That stands closed. India needs to engage with Russia for restarting the facility, especially in light of what is happening in Afghanistan and China's growing footprints in Tajikistan and Gilgit Baltistan. India has engaged in military exercises in bilateral and multilateral formats and, under the aegis of SCO. In 2021, India's had engaged in exercises with all Central Asian countries, which is a good sign. The Kazakh Defence Minister Lt Gen Nurlan Yermekbayev visited Jodhpur and Jaisalmer in April 2021.⁴² India has trained Kazakh troops in UN Peacekeeping Operations and operated with them in its UNFIL Battalion⁴³. There is a military medicine agreement with Uzbekistan⁴⁴ and India has helped Kyrgyzstan in constructing a medical research facility.⁴⁵ India needs to continuously keep raising the bar and remain in business through the export of

⁴⁰ [**“Indo-Tajik Friendship Hospital Observes 4th International Yoga Day”**](#), Embassy of India, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 21 June 2018.

⁴¹ [**“Will Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan Become India's 1st Overseas Military Base?”**](#), *The Eurasian Times*, 11 October 2018.

⁴² [**“Kazakhstan Defence Minister Visits India for Bilateral Talks”**](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 7 April 2021.

⁴³ Mayank Singh, [**“Indian Battalion to Command Kazakhstan Army Contingent”**](#), *ANI*, 16 November 2018.

⁴⁴ [**“Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh holds talks with Defence Minister of Uzbekistan Major General Bakhodir Nizamovich Kurbanov in Tashkent”**](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 3 November 2019.

⁴⁵ [**“Joint Statement between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of India”**](#), Embassy of India, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 12 July 2015.

defence platforms and in areas such as Artificial Intelligence, software and space to provide Central Asian countries alternatives other than China. India's membership of the SCO in 2017, ostensibly on Russia's bidding to balance China in the region, has given India a stage in Central Asia. It would be detrimental to India's strategic interests if China allows its military presence to influence policies in Central Asian countries.

Conclusion

At present, Beijing's military presence in Central Asia is calibrated to keep Russia's sensitivities in mind. In future, China may not defer to Russia but may simply develop its own initiatives ignoring Russia. Beijing's decision to establish the QCCM in 2016, operate border posts in Tajikistan and open up China plus Central Asia, a multi-lateral mechanism launched outside SCO in 2020, points to actions by China that it is not worried about overstepping red lines in the future. Moscow's concerns remain understated due to US–Russia tensions or the loss of Ukraine to the West. Nevertheless, the shift in the balance of dominance and China's nonchalance to Russia in Central Asia is growing. It has the potential to vex the complex chessboard in Central Asia, which Russia considers its sphere of influence. Will Russia move to re-balance China's growing influence in Central Asia or would Central Asia witness a resurgent muscular dragon holding both the carrot and the stick in Central Asia? These are some pertinent questions to ponder upon.

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